

World Breastfeeding Week 2007

Statement by HM Queen Rania Al Abdullah, UNICEF's Eminent Advocate for Children

Even though latest available data shows substantial improvement in terms of exclusive breastfeeding over the past decade, including remarkable strides in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and the Commonwealth of Independent States, less than 40% of mothers in the developing world practice exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of their babies' lives.

As we celebrate World Breastfeeding Week 2007, there is still a huge rift between countries and regions towards ideal child nutrition. This tells apart good performing countries from others where socioeconomic disparities, gender-based violence and discrimination, pervading poverty and the scourge of conflict endure.

The absence of exclusive breastfeeding results in devastating and irreversible effects on a child's optimal health, survival and potential for development.

Exclusive breastfeeding constitutes a baby's first immunization against infectious and non-infectious disease as it provides the newborn with proteins as well as essential growth and nutrition factors.

Exclusive breastfeeding significantly decreases the risk of diarrhea and respiratory infections; it helps increase the child's cognitive function and enhances the natural bonding with the mother.

World Breastfeeding Week 2007 illustrates the importance of exclusive breastfeeding from the first hour of birth: Abundant scientific research is available, which proves newborns' ability to instinctively find the mother's breast on their own. This innate miracle has been called "breast crawl" and highlights how naturally critical it is to breastfeed within the first hour after delivery.

Evidence shows that exclusive breastfeeding up to six months can reduce the child mortality by 13 percent while a recent study shows that early initiation by 1 hour could prevent 22% of all neonatal (babies below one month) deaths. Women have a right to this knowledge and to receive the support that they need to initiate breastfeeding accordingly.

The WHO-UNICEF Global Strategy for Infant and Young Child Feeding aims at preventing early childhood malnutrition and improving the odds of child survival as a whole by improving infant and young child feeding practices. It also calls for

the more commitments by the governments to ensure the development of environments that empower women to breastfeed exclusively for the first six months and continue to breastfeed for two years or more.

Equally important is the need for public support through government commitment and public encouragement. The world needs realistic policy options that include public and community support to pregnant and lactating mothers as well as a mother's adequate nutrition, care and advice.

Protecting breastfeeding during emergencies is another major UNICEF priority, which focuses on curbing poor feeding practices which generally set off the proliferation of child-killer diseases.

Overall, the world has made little progress to reduce the global proportion of underweight children. Hence, I call on world leaders, policymakers and the general public to support World Breastfeeding Week as an immediate means of reducing child morbidity and mortality and a practical way of promoting family health.

Exclusive breastfeeding is fundamental to achieving the Millennium Development Goals and can also result in significant reductions in current health expenditure.

There is abundant evidence demonstrating the direct links between the exclusive breastfeeding and reduction of under-five mortality and recent studies showing links between early initiation of breastfeeding and the reduction of neonatal mortality.

The improvement highlighted above concerning Sub-Saharan Africa indicate that changes in exclusive breastfeeding, which involve behavioural change, are possible, even within a relatively short period of time. Yet, with child malnutrition still contributing to an estimated 53% of all deaths of all children under five, there is wide room for improvement.

The time is ripe for us all to join hands and do more and better.

Queen Rania Al-Abdullah
UNICEF's Eminent Advocate for Children

World Breastfeeding Week 2007 MENA Regional Fact Sheet

A Regional Overview

- Although rates in the region have increased significantly since 1990, less than 40% of mothers in MENA practice exclusive breastfeeding. Despite an average increase of the practice worldwide, there are signs of localized decline in several regions, including the Middle East and North Africa, especially in terms of the duration of exclusive breastfeeding.
- The main obstacle to sustaining exclusive breastfeeding in the region remains the persistence of inadequate feeding practices - and this links directly to particular concerns regarding severe malnutrition of under-fives in many countries.
- One of the causes of malnutrition is the low rate of exclusive breastfeeding for infants up to six months; exclusive breastfeeding reaches 31% of infants in Morocco and an estimated 38% in Egypt.¹
- Stepping up promotion of EBF and actual results at national level is crucial as some of the highest indicators come from middle income countries enjoying relative socio-economic and political stability (Tunisia 47%; Iran 44%).
- Conflict serves as a catalyst to malnutrition in countries where the nutritional status of women and adolescent females is gravely threatened. This generates a vicious circle that has similarly dire consequences in terms of infant feeding and a baby's chance to survive beyond his/her first year.
- Today, more than half of all Yemeni children under five are stunted and almost one-third of babies are born with low weight. Only one in four children (25%) aged less than six months are exclusively breastfed in Iraq. In spite of the critical conditions in the country at present, the rate of exclusive breastfeeding doubled from 17% in 2000 to 34% in 2006 among children less than four months of age. A model example of progress comes from the occupied Palestinian territory, where reports



"Motherhood" by Pablo Picasso

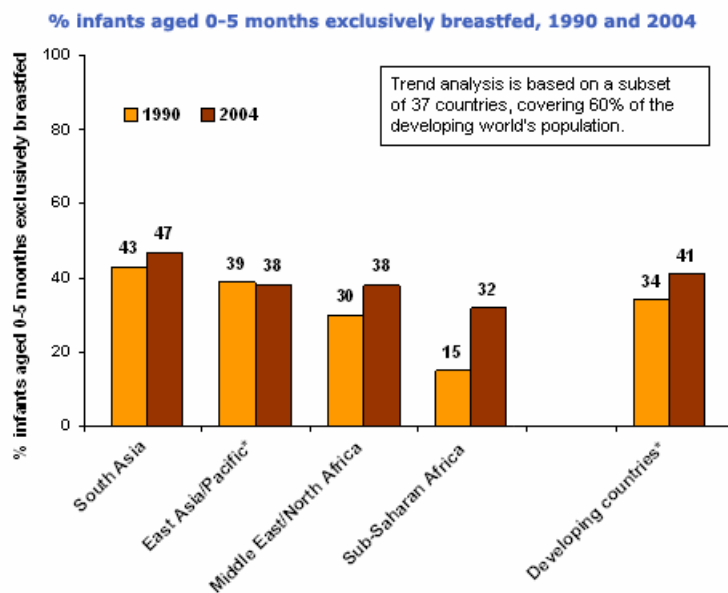
¹ Exclusive breastfeeding: The infant has received only breast milk from the mother or a wet nurse, or expressed breast milk, and no other liquids or solids with the exception of drops or syrups consisting of vitamins, mineral supplements, or medicines.

indicate that of all children born during the past five years, 97,5% were breastfed and exclusive breastfeeding remaining at 26,5% for infant in the 0-5 month age range.²

- Migration to the cities and an increasing number of (lactating) mothers entering the labor force is seen a combined phenomenon significantly contributing to the drop in exclusive breastfeeding. This also generates reduced awareness of the importance of breastfeeding and promotes the massive use of breast milk substitutes and complementary food.

The Rate of Progress

Trends in exclusive breastfeeding rates (first six months of life)



Data are insufficient for trend analysis of Latin America/Caribbean and CEE/CIS regions.

*excludes China.

Source: UNICEF analysis of regional trends in underweight prevalence, 2006.

The way forward

- Several Arab countries are already promoting Infant and Young Child feeding strategies, with exclusive breastfeeding at the core of interventions. However, the promotion of Infant and Young Child feeding need to drastically scale up efforts in the immediate future.
- Government policies and legislations are required to enable mothers to practice exclusive breastfeeding for six months. Similar action is needed with regards to the breastfeeding needs of female workers and the development of supportive environments encouraging mothers to breastfeed.

Scientific evidence and Key Advocacy Messages

² Preliminary Reports, MICS 3, Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys

- Promotion of early initiation of breastfeeding has the potential to make a major contribution to the achievement of the child survival Millennium Development Goal.
- 16% of all neonatal deaths globally could be saved if all infants were breastfed from day 1 and 22% if breastfeeding started within the first hour.³
- Exclusive breastfeeding up to six months (13%) of all under-five deaths and complementary feeding between 6-9 months (6%) with continued breastfeeding could save around 20% of all under-five deaths⁴
- Achievement of optimal infant and young child feeding and related maternal nutrition will yield the best survival, growth, and development outcomes, reduce chronic illnesses and when implemented fully will cut the under-five mortality rate in half.⁵

³ Official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, Vol. 104 No. 1 July 1999, p. e3

⁴ The Lancet Child Survival series

⁵ UNICEF-LAS 2005, Understanding the Present, Shaping the Future